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CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS, INCLUDING THE QUESTION OF RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

Written statement submitted by the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs of the World Council of Churches, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[21 January 2000]

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1. The Commission of Churches on International Affairs (CCIA) of the World Council of Churches, since its inception, has done extensive work in relation to the issue of religious freedom. Religious intolerance has a direct impact on this fundamental human right and is therefore a major concern of the Council and its member Churches. Over the years CCIA has wrestled with the phenomenon of religious intolerance, particularly in situations where minority religious communities have suffered at the hands of religious communities with political and juridical power. As far back as the late 1970s, the Executive Committee of the World Council of Churches warned of an increase in the trend towards religious intolerance in the following words: "In an increasing number of countries, communal and national aspirations are framed not in secular but religious terms, creating the climate for religious revival of a type which causes friction between dominant religious forces and minority religions." The situation today is far worse than it was 20 years ago. With religion playing a crucial and dominant role in the civil and political life of many a country, incidents of religious intolerance are on the increase, creating tensions and conflicts within societies.

2. At a consultation on "Human Rights and the Churches: New Challenges" organized by CCIA at Morges, Switzerland, in June 1998, the participants noted: "As Christians we are called to share in God's mission of Justice, Peace and Respect for all Creation and to seek for all humanity the abundant life which God intends. Within scripture, through tradition and from the many ways in which the spirit illumines our hearts today, we discern God's gift of dignity for each person and their inherent right to acceptance and participation within the community." CCIA has promoted equality of all persons and is of the firm conviction that human rights and human dignity of all persons irrespective of class, colour or creed need to be promoted through the exercise of tolerance, respect and appreciation of each other's religion or belief.

3. The VIIIth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, held in Harare from 3 to 14 December 1998, issued a Statement on Human Rights in which it reiterated its concern at the growing incidence of religious intolerance and its impact on the basic human rights of the people in the following terms: "Religion in our contemporary world increasingly influences socio-political processes. Many churches actively participate in peace-making activities and call for justice, bringing a moral dimension to politics. Yet, religion has become a major contributor to repression and human rights violations, both within and between nations. Religious symbols and idioms have been manipulated to promote narrow nationalist and sectarian interests and objectives, creating division and polarized societies. Powers increasingly tend to appeal to churches and other religious groups to support narrow national, racial and ethnic aims, and to support discriminatory legislation which formalizes intolerance. We urge the churches once again to give evidence of the universality of the gospel and to provide a model of tolerance to their societies and to the world. Religion can and must be a positive force for justice, harmony, peace and reconciliation in human society." Religious intolerance promotes violence and destruction, giving rise to fear and insecurity which negates the gift of life, the sanctity and dignity of all creation. Through its programmes and policies the World Council of Churches encourages its members to work for creation of an environment of tolerance in which a culture of non-violence can be nurtured - a non-violent culture that is conducive to the development of

new and appropriate approaches to conflict resolution and peace-keeping in the emerging globalized context. In this connection, the World Council of Churches has recently embarked on a Decade to Overcome Violence programme.

4. CCIA is deeply concerned at the increase in the number of incidents of religious intolerance in recent years. As a fellowship of Churches around the world, the Council receives regular reports of people who have become victims of violence as a result of religious intolerance. Religious intolerance and restriction of religious freedom have grown universally. The freedom of citizens to choose and practise the belief of their choice has now become more and more restricted. The pluralist base of the State is under widespread attack and religious extremism and intolerance are on the rise.

5. At the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on Human Rights, CCIA has submitted a written statement on the situation arising in Pakistan as a result of indiscriminate applications of the blasphemy law against Christians. That law remains on the country's statute book despite protests and appeals both within and outside the country for its repeal. The concerned authorities in Pakistan, despite assurances, have neglected to amend even the procedural part of the law in order to prevent its abuse. The fires of intolerance of religious minorities have been kept burning by extremist religious forces that are helped by the officials and the organs of the State. Though there has been some reduction in the registration of fresh cases, by and large the situation remains unchanged because of the prevalent environment of hostility and intolerance of religious minorities. At present a number of Christians charged under the blasphemy law are in jail pending trial by the courts. The 1998 Annual Report of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan has documented these cases. According to the report intolerance in Pakistani society is on the increase and the authorities have made no effort to check it. On the contrary, official actions and pronouncements often tend to encourage this trend.

6. CCIA has also been concerned at the developments in Indonesia since the May 1998 riots that brought about the downfall of former President Suharto. The Council, through regular visits of pastoral delegations and staff as well as through consultation with member Churches in the country, has kept itself informed of the situation. CCIA is particularly concerned about the situation in the port city of Ambon where Christians and Muslims have long lived side by side in peace. In the recent past many churches and mosques have been destroyed. Hundreds of Christians and Muslims have been killed in the wave of destruction that began in mid-January 1999 and continues till date with no visible signs of coming to an end. The severity of the clashes and violence in Ambon could have been avoided if the Indonesian military had remained non-partisan and discharged its duty of restoring law and order in the region seriously. CCIA is of the considered view that to restore intercommunal peace and harmony it is necessary that the Government of Indonesia encourage dialogue between the two communities. The Christians in Indonesia are willing to enter into such a dialogue. This is evident from the Christmas message of The Communion of Churches in Indonesia. The message says, "That the Christmas event gives us the inspiration to continuously endeavour [to establish a] relationship and cooperation with all national components in building a new united, peaceful, just and prosperous Indonesia, which gives [a] place to plurality and appreciates human dignity."

7. CCIA reiterates its concern: at the increase in incidents of conflicts between religious minorities and majorities; at attempts by Governments to control and regulate religions and religious organizations; at the use of political institutions by one religion to discriminate against another; at the lack of political will on the part of Governments to check religious extremism and to promote intercommunal harmony.

8. CCIA appreciates the excellent work done by the Special Rapporteur, particularly his efforts to promote religious tolerance through engagement and dialogue. It is essential that such dialogue becomes a vehicle in the mutual search for better understanding of each other's perspective, of a better understanding of human life and a just and merciful society.